Getting Started With Critical Cataloging

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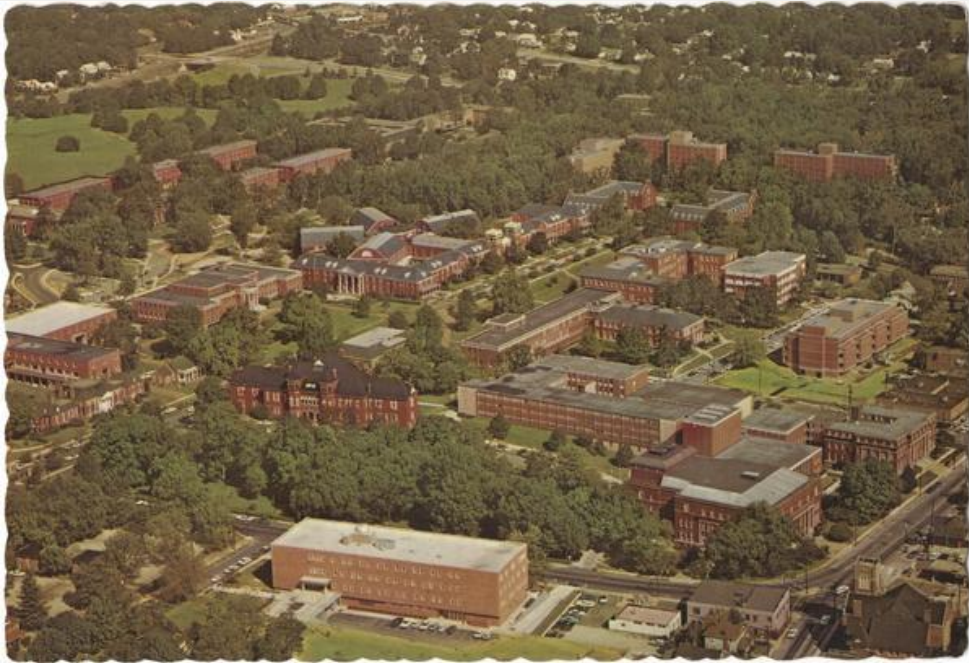
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Land acknowledgement

We acknowledge that the land we are gathered on has long served as the site of meeting and exchange amongst a number of Indigenous peoples, including the Eno, Keyauwee, Occaneechi, Saura, and Shakori. We also want to acknowledge the long history and lasting legacies of slavery on these lands.

Welcome!

We're here to talk about learning to implement critical cataloging practices in our department

But first, some background about critical librarianship and critical cataloging!

Critical librarianship

Principles of crit lib

Critical librarianship (Drabinski, 2019):

- Interrogates the work of power in structures and systems
- Acknowledges the social, economic, and political context of library policies and processes
- Surfaces hidden labor
- Articulates the infrastructures that enable some lines of inquiry and not others
- Knows that the world could be different

A critical eye on libraries & archives

- Physical & digital accessibility
- Collection development
- Sensitive cultural materials
- Organization & description
- Public policies
  - Overdue fines
  - Rules & consequences
- Types, timing, & accessibility of programming

Crit lib in action

- Abolishing overdue fines
- Contracting with truly accessible digital vendors
- Crafting equitable collection development and user policies
- Employee policies and workplace culture
- Critical evaluation of information organization and description (i.e., critical cataloging)
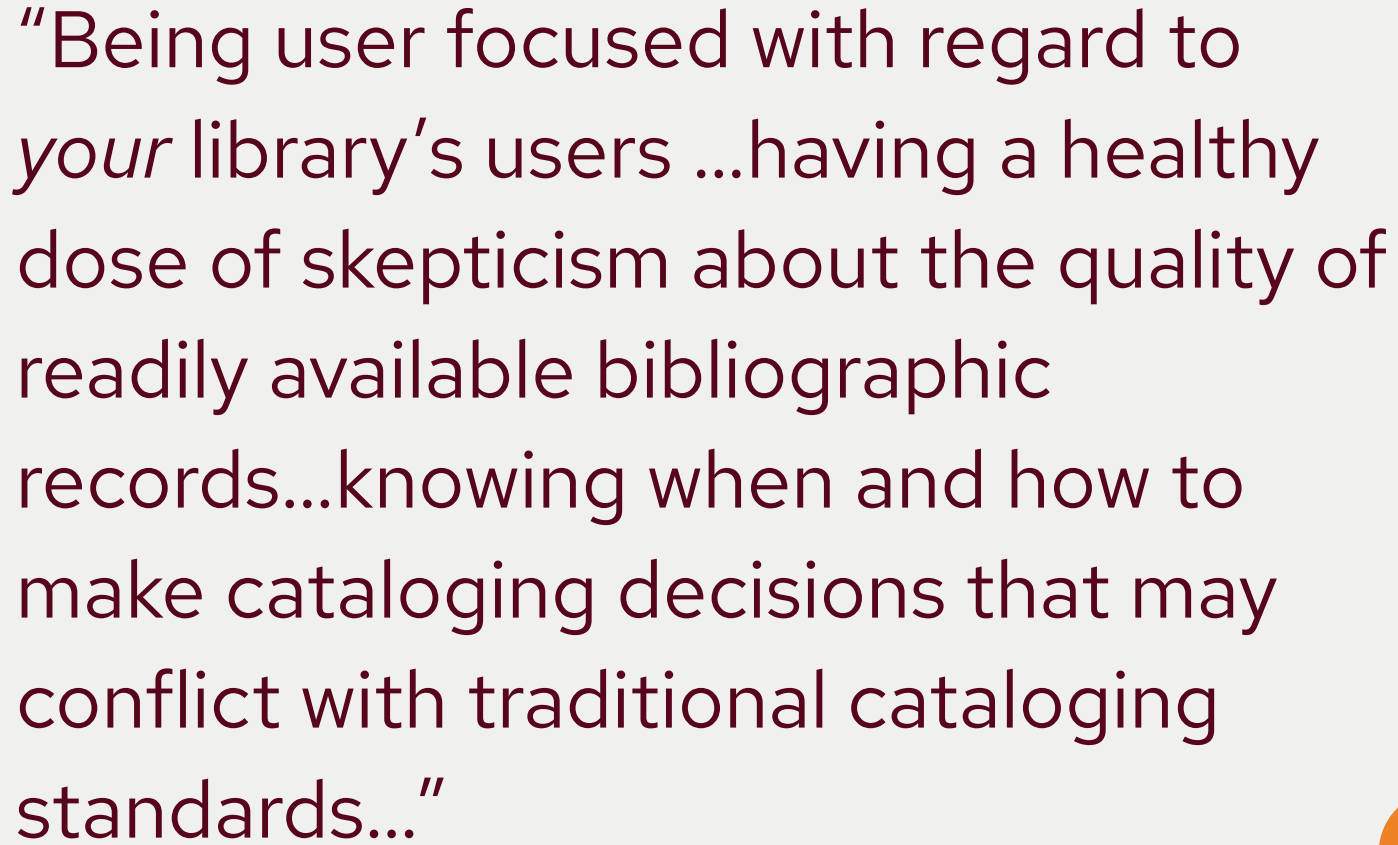
Critical cataloging

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What is critical cataloging?

- Offshoot of both critical librarianship & radical cataloging
- Critical cataloging is narrower term (NT) of radical cataloging
  - Watson (2020)

"Being user focused with regard to *your* library's users …having a healthy dose of skepticism about the quality of readily available bibliographic records…knowing when and how to make cataloging decisions that may conflict with traditional cataloging standards…"
(Roberto, 2008)

"...social justice-oriented style of radical cataloging that places an emphasis on radical empathy, outreach work, and recognizes the importance of information maintenance and care." (Watson, 2020)

Background

[Prejudices and antipathies: a tract on the LC subject heads concerning people](#) (1971 & 1993)

- Sanford Berman

Other scholars

- Adler ([2017](#))
- Drabinski ([2013](#))
- Olson ([2001](#))

[Radical cataloging: Essays at the front](#) (2008)

- K.R. Roberto (Ed.)

Importance to the profession

- Benefits:
  - Improved resource access & discovery
  - Mitigating harm
  - Promoting inclusion & examining neutrality

Access & Discovery

- Improved discovery of resources
- Ensuring relevant language for searching
- Accurate & respectful name authority data

Mitigating harm

- Library users and staff might encounter harmful language
- Work to reduce and mitigate needed to increase inclusivity
  - Hardesty, J., & Nolan, A. (2021)

Neutrality & Inclusion

- Critical cataloging challenges idea of cataloging neutrality
- Professional value of neutrality in cataloging in place to promote objectivity

- Neutrality in cataloging practice works against harm mitigation
- Critical cataloging to help promote inclusion as a professional value

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Critical cataloging: practical examples

Name authorities & ethics

- Application of critical cataloging principles to name authority data & ethical issues raised
  - [Ethical questions in name authority control](#) (2019)
  - Sandberg, J. (Ed.)
- Work & scholarship on recording gender for NACO records
  - Billey, A. & Drabinski, E. ([2019](#))

Subject headings & controlled vocabularies

- Receives the most attention in critical cataloging conversations
- Issues with CVs and subject heading easier to identify
  - LCSH and "illegal aliens"
    - Case study: Lo, G. (2019)

Critical perspectives on classification

- N- (changed to B-) & O-cutters (not yet changed)
- Pathologization/medicalization of groups of people
  - Historically, gay & other queer people
  - Autistic (& other neurodivergent) people
    - Ganin, N. (2021)
- Dewey notorious for forcing non-Western (etc.) topics into inaccurate classifications

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Getting started with critical cataloging at UNCG

Technical Services at UNCG

- Department created in 2016 by merging Acquisitions and Cataloging

- 17 FTE, including faculty, staff, and temporary positions

- We're not experts on critical librarianship or critical cataloging, but we're actively working on learning

UNCG Tech Services & EDI efforts

- Diversity audits of collections

- Participation in Reparative Archives Working Group

- Professional development and learning; following developments and changes in the profession

- Active development of skills and practices in specific areas--critical cataloging and metadata remediation

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Critical cataloging in progress: Cutter project

Cutter project

- Idea to remediate the LCC call numbers in use impacted by the recent .N cutter change
- Planning & logistics:
  - Determining workflow
  - Interdepartmental effort
- Challenges:
  - Time
  - Upcoming building renovation

"

Getting started with critical cataloging: Hansen collection

The Robert C. Hansen Performing Arts Collection

- Dates from the 1700s to the early 2000s (bulk 1800s–2000s)

- Contents: programs, heralds, guidebooks, periodicals, playbooks, sheet music, song books, correspondence, autographs, original costume and scenery designs, posters, photographs, postcards, tradecards, other visual materials, scrapbooks, subject files, and other memorabilia

- Documents the history of the performing arts, mainly theatre, in many countries, mainly the United States, Canada, and the United Kingdom

- Some materials have been digitized, but most of this collection is not available online.

Hansen Collection subset: historical sheet music

- Dates from the 1840s–1920s (bulk 1900–1929)

- Sheet music, primarily songs

- Most items include cover art

- Many include advertisements for other musical compositions and/or excerpts of other songs

- Digitized and available online:

  - https://gateway.uncg.edu/islandora/object/mss%3AMSS0255

BE MY LITTLE BABY BUMBLE BEE

WORDS BY STANLEY MURPHY

AS SUNG BY BRICE AND KING

MUSIC BY HENRY I. MARSHALL

IN ZIEGFELD MOULIN ROUGE

FORMERLY NEW YORK THEATRE

F. ZIEGFELD JRS PRODUCTION

"A WINSOME WIDOW"

BIMINI BAY

SONG BY THE WRITERS OF "AINT WE GOT FUN"

LYRIC BY GUS KAHN & RAYMOND B. EGAN

MUSIC BY RICHARD A. WHITING

VOICE.

Vamp

mf

p

Queen - ie bee lived
Wil - lie, he flew

o'er the lee And she was a bun-ny lit-tle hon-ey bee.
o'er the lee To call on her ma-ma and her pa-pa bee.

Not pictured: many examples of objectionable images, words, and phrases

Hansen Collection metadata work, 2011

- Author name clean-up in digital collections metadata

- Addition of LCSH to records in digital collection

- Addressing other minor metadata and digital file issues as they were encountered
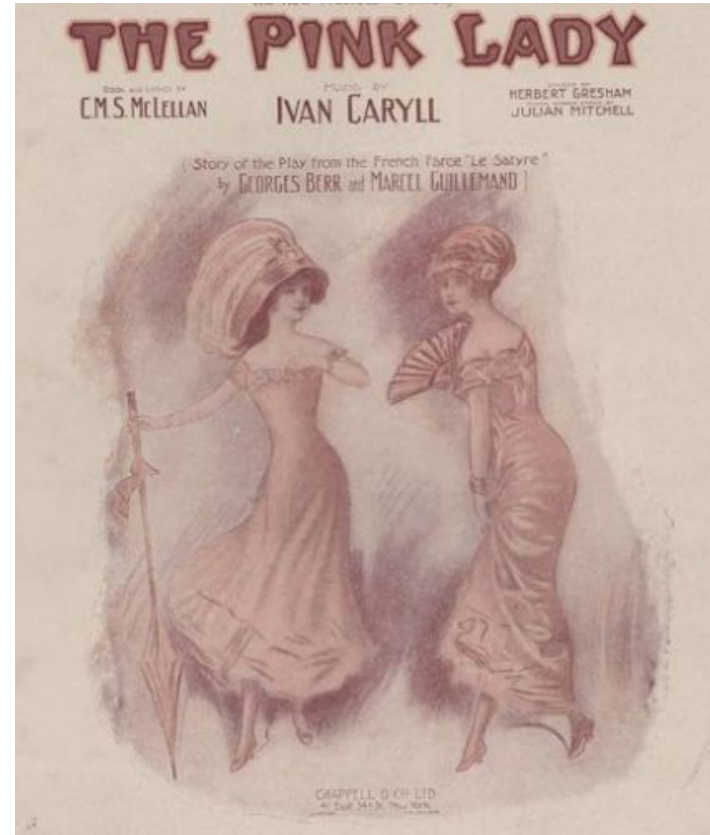
2011 was a different time!

Sheet music metadata work, 2011

Did:

- Notice problematic aspects of images, terms, etc within collection materials

- Feel uncomfortable with some of the collection contents

- Follow expected workflows and practices

- Finish the project & move on

Didn't:

- Discuss the problematic aspects

- Consider the possibility of addressing the issues we found

- Question the practices we had in place

- Think about it much once we were done, *until….*

Why the Hansen collection?

- Many examples of problematic content and/or description = Many opportunities to provide more accurate and respectful language

- Manageable size (~500 items)

- Opportunities to learn from others in the profession who have similar collections
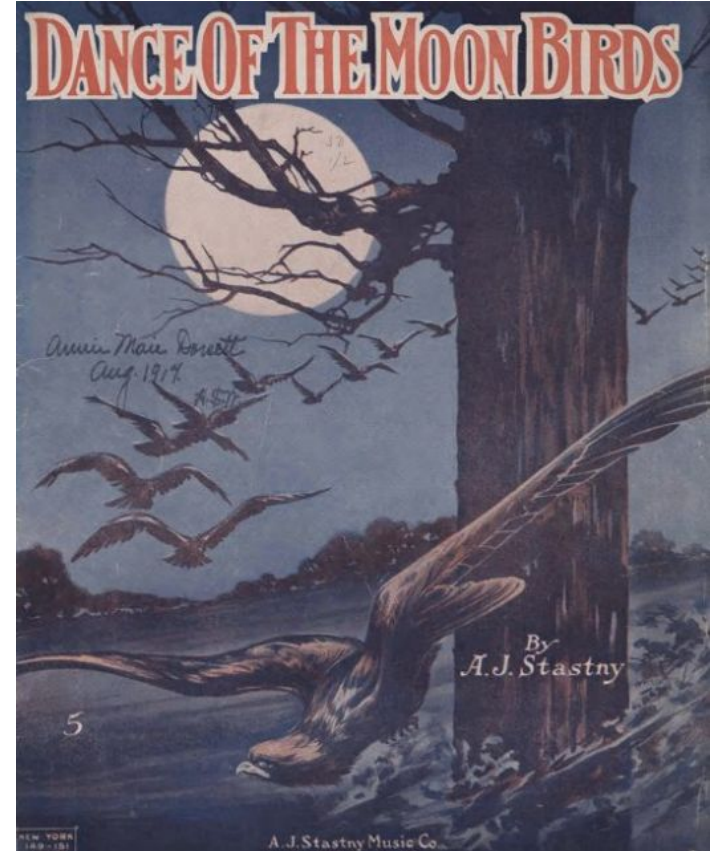
Hansen Collection metadata work, 2021-

- Specifically looking to provide more respectful and accurate metadata

- Considering critical cataloging practices and looking for ways to implement them

- Addressing other minor metadata and digital file issues as they are encountered

- Still in progress!
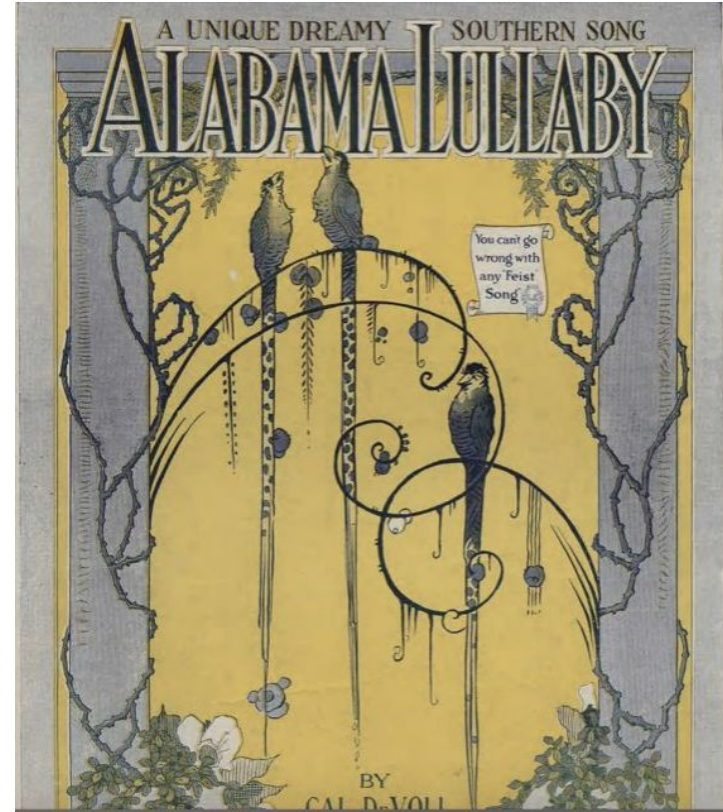
How have we approached this project?

- Reading relevant articles and other literature, attending webinars and conference sessions

- Seeking out examples of similar collections to see how other institutions have handled them

- Talking to personnel at other libraries who are active in this work

- Applying what we've learned to our project

- This work--and learning--is still in progress!

Hansen project - workflow

- Alphabetical list of materials divided into roughly equal chunks

- Process has been very iterative

  - Consult resources, review content & description, consult each other, repeat

- Frequent meetings and check-ins relative to amount of progress

Details

Project spreadsheet example

Title	Title	Text	Art	Other (describe)	Notes	Issue grouping
The Memphis Blues		X	X		The cover has a man in blackface; racist lyrics	racism
The Merry Widow Waltzes (Die Lustige Witwe Walzer)					instrumental	
The Message of the Honeymoon			X		Racist/caricatured depictions of Black people on the cover art	racism
The Navy of the U.S.A.						
The Ragtime Pipe of Pan						
The Red Lantern		X	X		Racist art and lyrics	Racism

We've flagged approximately one-fifth of the collection for remediation and/or further review

What kind of issues have we identified?

- Racism – particularly against Black people
  ○ Blackface art
  ○ Blackface minstrelsy
  ○ Legacy of slavery
  ○ Other racist language and/or images

- Colonialism

- Exoticism

- Misogyny, sexism

- Orientalism

- Xenophobia

- Disparaging language and/or images targeting racial, ethnic, and other minority groups

Minstrelsy & blackface headings

- LCSH
  - Minstrel music
  - Minstrel shows
  - Blackface entertainers
  - Blackface

- LCGFT
  - Minstrel music
  - Minstrel shows

- RBMS
  - Minstrel jokes
  - Minstrel songs

Difficult-to-remediate issues

- Colonialism
- Exoticism
- Misogyny, sexism
- Orientalism
- Xenophobia

➔ Satisfactory/precise terms expressing these concepts are often not established in existing CVs

➔ These issues are often subtle, coded, and passing

LCSH issues

- Genre vs. subject (is–ness vs. about–ness)
  - Using LCSH "off–label" for genre/form terms
    - Blackface
  - Using LCSH to describe contents
    - Racism against Blacks

LCSH issues

- –-Songs and music
  - "Use as a form subdivision […] under classes of persons, ethnic groups […] for collections or single works of vocal or instrumental music **about the subject**."
- African Americans–-Songs and music
  - Are these songs actually about Black people, or are they about a racist stereotype of Black people?
- Similar questions about other ethnic and racial groups

"Big Indian Chief" (1904)

J. Rosamond Johnson, music
Bob Cole, text

First lines of chorus:

"Big Chief love um little Kickapoo maiden,
Love um heap much too[…]"

Previous subject headings

- Popular music--United States--1901-1910
- Love songs
- Musicals--Excerpts--Vocal scores with piano
- Kickapoo Indians--Women--Arizona--Songs and music
- Indians--Kings and rulers--Songs and music

Potential new headings

- Caricatures (RBMS Genre Terms)
- Ethnic stereotypes (TGM)
- Humorous songs (LCGFT)
- African Americans--Music (LCSH)
  - Johnson & Cole were both successful Black musicians, in and outside vaudeville
  - Johnson composer of "Lift Every Voice and Sing"

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Other considerations

- Multiple works involved with different descriptive issues

  - Visual work

  - Textual work

  - Musical work*

- Issues in some musical works absolutely exist, but these are less readily identifiable and require more judgment and expert analysis

More questions & ambiguities

- Cataloger's judgment: how present does a certain concept need to be to warrant inclusion?

- How much research do we do? Is it necessary or even useful to identify all Black composers & performers in subject headings?

- How far do we push subject headings, especially LCSH, into describing "is-ness"?

Next steps

- Select, review, finalize new headings

- Ensure new vocabularies will be imported correctly

- Submit entire batch to replace existing metadata

- Consider practices and workflows for future collections and projects

Hansen project: What have we learned?

- Historical context about this collection and its era

- Some objectionable content is clear and dramatic, while other issues are more subtle; there are also gray areas

- Sometimes we have to question our own assumptions about and understandings of the materials we're working with

- Not all the issues we've flagged will necessarily be addressed through metadata remediation

- This work is a process

Getting involved and getting started

Challenges and logistics

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Challenges we've encountered

- **Time**: we are already being asked to do more with less

- **Competing demands**: other major projects (repository migration, building renovation, and more); we can't always prioritize critical cataloging work

- **Expertise**: we're not experts, but we're learning. We're pursuing learning opportunities and also reaching out to others who are involved in this work at other institutions.

Thinking about getting involved in critical cataloging work?

- Needed: willingness to learn, willingness to question assumptions and practices while working toward reducing harm and increasing inclusivity

- You don't have to have a blatantly offensive collection to do this work

- Seek out learning opportunities:

    - https://go.uncg.edu/ccres

A final thought:

We've talked about some individual projects that are part of our exploration of critical cataloging work, but our work in this area won't stop when those projects are complete.

This effort is about building a practice and culture that will hopefully extend beyond just these projects and into the larger department and library.

THANKS!

Any questions?

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- Anna: arcraft@uncg.edu

Slides: https://go.uncg.edu/amigos2022

Resources and works cited: https://go.uncg.edu/ccres

Credits

- Presentation template by SlidesCarnival
  - Illustrations by Sergei Tikhonov

Examples of objectionable materials

- Racism – particularly against Black people
  - Blackface art
  - Blackface minstrelsy
  - Legacy of slavery
  - Other racist language and/or images
- Colonialism

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